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Best Estimate On Brezhnev Is Only a Guess

I'd like to issue a mild warning about the spate of learned prognostications on what will happen if Soviet president Leonid I. Brezhnev recovers from his current illness or if he doesn't.

The truth, I'm sorry to say, is that no one really knows for sure. And I mean no one, American or Russian. So the best the CIA and other western intelligence agencies can do is offer an educated guess.

One popular consensus, for example, is that Brezhnev may announce his retirement at a meeting of the central committee that is scheduled for late next month. But even those who have come up with this theory emphasize that they don't know for sure. No one has ever gone broke betting against people who offer dead certainties on Kremlin succession, from Lenin to Stalin to Khrushchev and now Brezhnev.

In fact, I can assure you that in recent years the secret files at CIA headquarters in Langley, Va., have been stuffed with predictions that Brezhnev was sick, or tired, or sick and tired, and was ready to give it

all up and retire to his dacha and grow cabbages. They turned out to be worth as much as the tickets that litter the ground at a racetrack any day of the season.

Here's one of my favorites from the cracked crystal ball file. It's a top-secret CIA report of a few years back.

According to this report, Brezhnev's younger brother Yakov "told a foreign friend" that Big Brother was planning to retire. "Yakov said he [Leonid] would do this because he is not well, and because he could leave office on the same basis of good will that he entered it," the CIA explained, adding: "Brezhnev is said to feel he will leave a legacy of accomplishment."

This might seem to be thin gruel indeed, but it was enough for the CIA analysts to sink their teeth into with gusto. "If Brezhnev has made a decision to retire," they speculated, "this is perhaps how the story might first leak out: a family member letting himself talk too much to a well-known acquaintance from abroad. Thus, it seems worthy of more attention than some of the other stories about Brezhnev's plans."

Intelligence sources told my associate Dale Van Atta that the CIA has repeatedly put forth predictions, carefully hedged, that Brezhnev is going to retire. It's left up to other intelligence agencies to throw cold water on the CIA palm readers.

In the case of Yakov Brezhnev, it was the State Department that provided the necessary skepticism. The Foggy Bottom Soviet experts diplomatically acknowledged that the CIA's raw information may have been accurate, but said it probably reflected one of Brezhnev's blue moods.

"Clearly, Brezhnev has periods of elation and depression and his intentions may vary as his moods swing," the top secret State Department report explained. "Thus we can expect contradictory reporting on his plans . . ."

It was the State Department, also, that issued a rather jaundiced general view of "inside" tips from Soviet sources. The report noted that "a number of Soviet sources reported impending major changes in the top-ranking leadership which turned out to be false," and went on to warn:

"Almost no Soviet with whom westerners have contact has inside, reliable information on changes in the Politburo months or even weeks in advance."

Eventually, of course, one of the myriad prognostications about Brezhnev is bound to come true. Until then, I'll buy the State Department's warning: "Experience suggests that the leadership rumors should normally be treated as speculation by knowledgeable, but not necessarily well-informed, political observers."